

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE A23

NEW YORK TIMES  
6 September 1985

IN THE NATION | Tom Wicker

# The Final Word?

In the two years since Korean Air Lines Flight 007 was shot down over Sakhalin Island on Sept. 1, 1983, with the loss of all 269 persons aboard, the Reagan Administration has steadfastly maintained that no one in the U.S. Government knew that the airliner was in danger until after it had been destroyed by a Soviet fighter plane. Therefore, officials insist, they could not have warned Flight 007 that it was off course and headed for sensitive Soviet territory.

On Sept. 2, 1983, Charles Lichtenstein, the deputy U.S. representative to the United Nations, was asked by a Soviet delegate if the U.S. had tracked the flight of the airliner. "No," Mr. Lichtenstein replied, "I would assure the representative of the Soviet Union: We followed you following the flight."

It's hard to understand how U.S. monitors could have tracked Soviet monitors as the latter tracked Flight 007, while the American monitors had no knowledge that Flight 007 was off course and in trouble; but the Administration has not explained Mr. Lichtenstein's statement. A U.S. official, for example, was quoted as follows in The Washington Post on Feb. 24, 1985: "We have never explained that because it gets into intelligence information."

If Mr. Lichtenstein's remark was a security breach that can't be further discussed, what about President Reagan's assertion in a radio address on Sept. 5, 1983, that "the Soviets tracked this plane for two and a half hours . . ."? And if the U.S. knew so much about what the Russians were doing, how could it have known nothing of what Flight 007 — the object of the Soviet activity — was doing?

As summed up by Sugwon Kang of Hartwick College in the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars for April-June 1985:

"In a position to monitor some phases of the flight were at least one P-3 Orion Navy reconnaissance plane, several RC-135s, the frigate USS Badger, the reconnaissance ship USS Observation Island with its radar, 'Cobra Judy,' and, of course, the land-based facilities in Alaska, on Shemya Island ('Cobra Dane' and 'Cobra Talon'), in Hokkaido (the phased-array radar at Wakkanai) and main-island Japan (the mighty NSA listening post at the U.S. Air Base at Misawa, near the northern tip of Honshu, the largest American listening post in Asia)."

That Flight 007 was not warned can be explained only by insisting that despite this array of electronic sentinels, no American knew the airliner

was in trouble at any time during its 5-hour, 26-minute journey from Anchorage to disaster over Sakhalin. That insistence already has been broken by Government admission, in a civil suit brought against the U.S. and K.A.L. by survivors of those who died aboard Flight 007, that Air Force tape recordings of part of the plane's flight track were "routinely" destroyed after it was shot down.

To support its version of events, the Administration often cites a report of the International Civil Aviation Organization, which it calls "the most authoritative account" of the Flight 007 incident. As pointed out in the Aug. 17-24 issue of The Nation, the I.C.A.O. report relied without challenge on the information the Governments involved chose to provide it. Thus, it did not consider whether the U.S. had been able to monitor — and therefore to warn — Flight 007 on its disastrous course.

The entire investigation on which the report rests — only the second disaster inquiry in I.C.A.O. history — was carried out by five full-time and four part-time investigators in just 60 days. In sharp contrast, the National Transportation Safety Board — which did not inquire into the 007 disaster — used more than 100 people for seven months to compile its report on the DC-10 crash at O'Hare Airport in 1979.

Yet the I.C.A.O. report is "the most authoritative" official study of the destruction of Flight 007. The recent crash of an Air India jet off Ireland, for example, is undergoing more extensive official analysis. The "black box" recorder from that plane was recovered in a few days; the 007 recorder never has been reported found.

Nor has the I.C.A.O. report been accepted without dispute, outside the Reagan Administration. The organization's own Air Navigation Commission of 15 experts, reviewing the report, declared that "the magnitude of the diversion" of Flight 007 from its planned course "cannot be explained" by the kind of crew error suggested by the study. But this important dissent has received little notice in the U.S., and is never cited by the Reagan Administration in its continuing insistence that the I.C.A.O. report is the final word on Flight 007. □